Introduction

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Introduction: Humour and History

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What is humour? In the title of this book we use it as the most general and neutral notion available to cover a whole variety of behaviour: from apophthegms to spoonerisms, practical jokes to puns, farce to foolery. In other words, we see humour as any message – transmitted in action, speech, writing, images or music – intended to produce a smile or a laugh. This definition allows us not only to extend our investigations to antiquity, the Middle Ages and the beginning of the early modern period, but also to pose questions of interest to cultural historians: who transmits what humour in which way to whom, where and when?

Strictly speaking, the notion of 'humour' is relatively young.[1] In its modern meaning it is first attested in England in 1682, whereas before that it used to signify mental disposition or temperament. Lord Shaftesbury's famous *Sensus communis: an essay on the freedom of wit and humour* (1709) was one of the earliest writings to use it in the sense familiar to moderns as defined by the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, which characterizes humour as 'facetiousness, comicality' and considers it 'less intellectual and more sympathetic than wit'. Voltaire, in contrast, proposed a French origin for the term. He claimed that humour in the new English sense, meaning 'plaisanterie naturelle', was derived from the French *humeur* as employed by Corneille in his first comedies.[2] It is true that the English originally derived '*humour*' from the French in the meaning of one of the four chief fluids of the body (blood, phlegm, bile and black bile), but it is more than doubtful whether the contemporary English meaning was also derived from France. In fact, from 1725 onwards the French invariably characterize the term as an English borrowing – a usage for which Voltaire is, of course, an indirect witness.[3] In 1862 Victor Hugo still spoke about 'that English thing they call humour', and it was only in the early 1870s that some Frenchmen started pronouncing it in the French way.[4]

A similar development may be traced in other countries. In the Dutch

Republic, in 1765, English humour was still seen as something 'which they virtually find only on their isle'.[5] In Germany, too, the word was an English 'import', as Lessing explicitly states. In fact, he first translated 'humour' as 'Laune', taking it in its older sense, although he corrected himself afterwards.[6] And still in 1810 an early German biographer of Joseph Haydn noted that 'a sort of innocent mischievousness, or what the British call humour', had been a principal trait of the composer's character.[7]

Yet the first mention of a new term does not always imply the rise of a new phenomenon, as is illustrated by the German *Witz* or the Dutch *mop*. These two relatively late words describe a phenomenon that far antedates them, namely the short joke, which rushes headlong to its punch line. Such narratives were already present in the seventeenth century, but *Witz* first appears at the end of the eighteenth and its equivalent *mop* at the end of the nineteenth century. These examples also show that specific terms, such as joke, gag or *blague*, all have their own history and may differ more from one another than is usually realized.

It would be fascinating to follow the meanderings of the notion of humour and all the other humorous terms handed down from antiquity or coined in later times. As part of such an undertaking the topic of 'national styles' could be addressed.[8] What does it mean, for example, when Robert's standard French dictionary defines humour as 'Forme d'esprit qui consiste à présenter ou à deformer la réalité de manière à en dégager les aspects plaisants et insolites', whereas its German counterpart, the Duden, defines it as the 'Gabe eines Menschen, der Unzulänglichkeit der Welt und der Menschen, den Schwierigkeiten und Missgeschicken des Alltags mit heiterer Gelassenheit zu begegnen'? Part of this national style is also the tendency to deny a sense of humour to others, as when a character in one of André Maurois's novels claims that their lack of a sense of humour was the sole reason that the Germans started the Great War.[9]

Although humour should produce laughter, not all laughter is the fruit of humour. Laughter can be threatening and, indeed, ethologists have suggested that laughter originated in an aggressive display of teeth. On the other hand, humour and its corresponding laughter can also be highly liberating. We all know how a flash of humour can suddenly dissolve a tense atmosphere. In a wider context, carnival and comparable festivities can temporarily dissolve the rigid social rules with which we all have to comply, although often with low rather than high humour. Considering this diversity, it is not surprising that in his contribution to this book Jacques Le Goff observes that, until now, it has been impossible to establish coherence in the various words, concepts and practices of laughter.

Scholars have certainly tried to find such coherence. From Freud and Bergson to Mary Douglas, psychologists, philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists have endeavoured to find an all-encompassing theory of humour and laughter.[10] A mistake common to all these attempts is the tacit presupposition that there exists something like an 'ontology of humour', that humour and laughter are transcultural and ahistorical. However, laughter is just as much a culturally determined phenomenon as humour. As Henk Driessen notes in the final chapter, fieldwork experience documents the richness of comic expression around the world: some tribes laugh easily, whereas others are said to be dour and sombre. Similar variations can be noted in the history of Europe: the ancient Anglo-Saxons found it normal to roll over the floor with laughter, but modern man often expresses his appreciation of humour with a civilized chuckle.[11]

Until now, scholarly attention to humour has usually concentrated on works of literature or folk narratives. Typical examples are studies of humour in Shakespeare or jest-books from the early modern period. The more interesting of such studies try to relate the contents of humorous texts to particular literary traditions or to a specific type or motif, as classified in the motif indexes drawn up by ethnologists or literary historians. Unfortunately, it is only rarely that these studies clearly situate such texts within the group or culture in which they must have circulated. The authors of this volume aim at a wider application. In their different ways, they are interested in humour as a key to specific cultures (such as Renaissance Italy and nineteenth-century Germany), religions (such as early or post-Reformation Christianity) and professional groups (such as the laughter of politicians, as studied by Antoine de Baecque). This variety implies that they draw on a much wider range of source material than is normally taken into account. From philosophers and orators, from Church Fathers and manuals of civility, from practical jokes and jest-books, from parliamentary records and diaries, from paintings and collections of anecdotes – the contributors to this volume open up new vistas in cultural history by their use of uncommon or rarely exploited sources. Not that every possible source has been exhausted: lovers of Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*, Ives's songs or Ligeti's *Aventures* and *Nouvelles aventures* will immediately note the absence of any reference to humour in music. An admirer of the folly in the shape of a pepperpot in Dublin's Power Court will ponder the absence of architecture, and the study of satiric journals, such as by Mary Lee Townsend, has certainly revealed only the tip of the iceberg. The mere mention of *Punch*, *Private Eye* or the *National Lampoon* strongly suggests that the printing press in this respect has perhaps opened up more fields than most historians would want.

Humour was studied systematically first in antiquity. Unfortunately, it is not possible to trace satisfactorily the ancient theories of humour, since the second book of Aristotle's *Poetics*, which concentrated on comedy, has been irretrievably lost – a theme brilliantly exploited in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* – as have *On Comedy* and *On the Ludicrous* (fragments 709–10) by his pupil Theophrastus. Quotations and fragments of these and other works of Aristotle and his school, the Peripatetics, show that in his discussion of humour in *De oratore* (2.216–90) Cicero used this tradition, although certainly indirectly and transformed by Roman ideas. His is our first extant systematic analysis, and the next elaborate discussion, a century later by Quintilian, is heavily indebted to him.

Cicero is also an important source for the Roman vocabulary of humour. Although the Romans used their various terms without much consistency, some differentiation can be made. For example, *facetiae*, 'wittiness' or 'joke', is usually contrasted with *gravitas*, 'seriousness, respectability' (2.262, 3.30), whereas the less elegant *iocus*, which Quintilian contrasts with *serium* (6.3.21), means 'joke' but also 'banter'. Cicero also distinguished between 'wit of matter', telling anecdotes or entertaining stories, and 'wit of form', the making of humorous remarks and puns (2.239–47). Good humour knows its bounds and avoids at all costs mimicry and the postures of mimes and buffoons (2.244, 247). As Fritz Graf demonstrates, Cicero discussed humour for an upper-class readership, which had to amuse the public without losing its dignity.[12]

It is important to note that Cicero's treatise was very much alive in the Renaissance and early modern period. In his *Libro del cortegiano* of 1528 Castiglione made the same distinction between wit of matter and wit of form, but added a third type of humour, the *burla* or mild practical joke; as wit in action it combined the two other types. He equally warned that crying and laughing or miming the gestures and postures of other people were deemed indecorous and so were coarseness in words and deeds.[13]

Castiglione also cautioned his readers not to make fun of men and women from a good background. It was a truth already recognized by Cicero, when he advised his colleagues of the senatorial order not to make fun of one another, and a similar concern for the status of one's own group was found among the Spartans and the Athenian aristocracy, as Jan Bremmer demonstrates. This concern for the status of the group did not necessarily exclude poking fun at others outside one's own circle, however high their rank might be. At the end of her life, Sophia (1630–1714), electress of Hanover and mother of George I, remembered her youth at the court in The Hague. She tells how she loved to mock everybody (*à railler tout le monde*), to the pleasure of the

gens d'esprit but the chagrin of others. One of her favourite victims was a complete outsider, the prince of Talmont, who came to ask the hand of one of the princesses of Orange and was therefore hardly in the position to offer repartee.[14] In other words, where so many manuals on civility cautioned their readers that their mockery should be innocent, 'like the bites of lambkins', as Della Casa phrased it, the ridiculing of those outside one's own group may still have been 'like the bites of dogs'.[15] In the art of joking, considerations of rank and class often outweighed those of decorum and good form.

In fact, Sophia is one of the few women whose (merciless) wit was recorded. In antiquity, women were probably allowed to be present at performances of Greek comedies (although even this remains debated), but in general their social place, certainly for elite women, was inside the house rather than in the public sphere. It is therefore not surprising that for observations on female wit we have to go to a female anthropologist in modern Greece.[16] Due to the nature of our male-dominated sources, humour between women is also difficult to find in the Middle Ages. Moreover, feminist scholars have not failed to point out how misogynistic much male humour is in these periods, and how often male historians have failed to see this.[17] In the early modern period women took a more active part in public life, certainly in Northern Europe, but it is probably safe to say that, although women and the lower classes are represented in the sources, their voices are mostly faked, functioning as a vehicle to bolster existing hierarchies.

Although laughter is often associated with the lower classes or with popular culture, this volume hardly supports such a view. Aaron Gurevich takes a critical look at Bakhtin's famous study of Rabelais and his interpretation of popular culture as a culture of laughter. He accepts neither Bakhtin's suggestion of a clear opposition between learned and popular culture nor his characterization of the culture of the illiterati as based on laughter, even to the exclusion of fear and anxiety. Indeed, in recent years scholars have increasingly realized that much of the humorous material was thoroughly enjoyed by the elite. Although many intellectuals condemned jest-books, by doing so they often betrayed an intimate knowledge of the genre. Several chapters in this volume, all dealing with the early modern period, discuss the significance of the upper classes at length. Derek Brewer reminds us that 'popular culture includes gentlemen'; Mariët Westermann sees the boisterous paintings of Jan Steen as 'sublimated transgressions', constituting 'the private, perhaps nostalgic pleasures of an urban élite'; and Herman Roodenburg relates a Dutch manuscript containing some 2500 jokes, many of them far from purified, to the art of conversation cherished by the Dutch upper classes. Indeed, the appreciation of (low) humour by the elite has become so obvious that a recent study of Dutch

seventeenth-century farce chides those scholars in the 1980s who cautiously suggested this relish.[18] It should not be forgotten, however, that the present stress on elite humour may well be the outcome of a certain slant in our sources, which are, after all, rarely the product of the lower strata. A fresh look at the old sources may perhaps redress the imbalance in this respect.[19]

Bakhtin's idea of a pernicious influence on laughter by the Church is similarly unacceptable. The *risus monasticus*, as studied by Jacques le Goff, the *risus paschalis* or the well-known *exempla* belie this picture. After the Middle Ages, Catholics and Protestants did not ban all humour from the pulpit either. It remained a salient ingredient of the German *Barockpredigt*,[20] and in the Spanish Netherlands, as Johan Verberckmoes tells us, the Counter-Reformation produced its own jokes and anecdotes in combating the Protestants. Even the churches of Dutch Calvinism knew their mirth and laughter: an Amsterdam professor of rhetoric reproachfully noted that the ministers vented jokes and witticisms that would not do in the theatre, let alone in church.[21]

One may wonder why the behaviour of ministers would worry a professor of rhetoric, but when Erasmus, in his *Ecclesiastes* of 1535, opined that good preachers should eschew such habits as distorting their faces or gesticulating like buffoons, he was more or less quoting Cicero. Just as there was an art of conversation, so there was an art of joking, both relying heavily on ancient rhetoric. In the early modern period many boys went to schools where Latin was taught,[22] and in this way they learned, directly or indirectly, the prescriptions of ancient rhetoric, which, moreover, were often translated. Perhaps the enormous impact of these influences, not only on late medieval and early modern rhetoric but on the culture in its entirety (ranging from the codes of civility to the requirements of decorum in contemporary painting, acting and dancing), has only recently been fully realized.[23]

Let us conclude these introductory remarks with three observations on the development in humour through time. First, it is striking how the ruling discourse changes in the different periods. Whereas in antiquity philosophers and rhetoricians are the main authors of leading handbooks and discussions, in the Middle Ages monks and other theologians lay down the law; they retained their leading position in post-Tridentine Flanders, as Johan Verberckmoes shows. On the other hand, in the areas influenced by the Reformation, manuals of civility and the writings of essayists, such as Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, now set the tone. It is hardly surprising that in modern times psychologists and sociologists have come to the fore, the study of Freud being the most widely acknowledged example of this trend.[24]

Secondly, there is a continuous turnover in the producers of humour. Greece and Rome show that moderate humour became the domain of

the social elite, whereas buffoons and mimes gradually lost official approval. Our term 'scurrilous' still shows something of the depreciation of the *scurra*, the late antique and medieval professional jester, who in the times of Plautus and Cicero was a malicious gossip but still a man-about-town. In the Middle Ages he is usually classified with actors, jongleurs and mimes, people with a low social standing, and it is only the court fool who rises to social prominence. After the Middle Ages the collecting and telling of jokes became widely spread over the social spectrum, and it is clear that the telling of jokes even became part and parcel of the art of conversation among gentlemen. The gradual disappearance of this ideal and the rise of the modern professional jester, such as the clown, the comedian and the satirist, still remain largely uncharted.

Our third and final point is the development of humour itself. To what extent did humour change over the centuries? Did our ancestors laugh at the same jokes as we do, or was their sense of humour radically different from our own? Those who have read some of the humorous texts of the past may have found that some jokes are not bad at all, others distinctly unfunny and several even incomprehensible. In other words, these texts appear both familiar and unfamiliar to us. We may appreciate the wit of Erasmus, but the practical jokes relished by the English aristocracy, as related by Samuel Pepys, nowadays appear rather silly.

In his contribution to this volume, Peter Burke notes some important changes. He speaks of a 'disintegration' of traditional humour, which began in the later sixteenth century: there was a reduction of comic domains, occasions and locales; moreover, the clergy, ladies and gentlemen no longer participated in certain kinds of humour, at least not in public. This shifting of the 'frontiers' of the comic well fits Norbert Elias's study of the rise of 'civilization', which after nearly half a century still remains the central point of reference for the study of such developments.[25]

In his classic study on humour in Tudor and Stuart England Keith Thomas identified more or less the same development, emphasizing in particular the areas into which laughter was no longer allowed to penetrate.[26] Quoting Francis Bacon, who felt that 'there be certain things' which had to be protected from jest, Thomas pointed to the domains of Church and state, where a 'cult of decorum' cherishing values of sobriety and gravity gradually gained the upper hand. As we saw above, although after the Reformation priests and ministers may have been less austere in their sermons than is usually assumed, the early modern period clearly witnessed some important changes. Most of them are related to a strengthening of hierarchy, which culminated at the end of the seventeenth century in a general, neoclassical disdain of

all sorts of lower humour. It was also this preoccupation with decorum, as Thomas notes, which made the Augustan literary critics write so much on the topic of humour and laughter.[27] The coining of our modern concept of humour seems to have been a by-product of these larger social developments.

It was also in this period that the court fool finally made his exit. Charles II seems to have been the last king who took his court jester seriously. Such inversionary laughter, which ridiculed those in power and did not differ much from the laughter elicited by lords of misrule, still popular in the English countryside, or similar licensed buffoons, no longer fitted the new social structures. By this time, in England but also elsewhere in Europe, polite and folk humour had grown apart. It was a legacy that would persist for a long time. When the brothers Grimm rediscovered the 'people' and started to collect folk tales, they deliberately omitted jests and comic stories, concentrating instead on the more innocent genre of legends and fairy tales. We are still trying to fill that gap.

Notes

1 The standard study of the term 'humour' still remains F. Baldensperger, *Études d'histoire littéraire* (Paris, 1907), pp. 176–222.

2 *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, ed. L. Moland (54 vols, Paris, 1877–85), vol. 19, pp. 552–4: 'Les anglais ont pris leur *humour*, qui signifie chez eux plaisanterie naturelle, de notre mot *humeur* employé en ce sens dans les premières comédies de Corneille; et dans toutes les comédies antérieures' (from *Questions sur l'encyclopédie*). We are most grateful to Dr Robert McNamee from the Voltaire Foundation for his help in identifying quotations from Voltaire.

3 W. von Wartburg, *Französisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, vol. 4 (Basel, 1952), p. 514.

4 V. Hugo, *Les Misérables*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1862), p. 800: 'cette chose anglaise qu'on appelle l'humour'; E. Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (4 vols, Paris, 1873–4), s.v.

5 As is observed by Belle van Zuylen in a letter to her brother describing the contacts with the English general Eliot, the later Lord Heathfield, and his wife, quoted by P. Godet, *Madame de Charrière et ses amis (1740–1805)* (Lausanne, 1947), p. 69; 'J'ai dans mes folies de cet *humour* qui'ils ne trouvent guère que dans leur île'.

6 C. G. Lessing, *Sämmtliche Schriften*, ed. K. Lachmann (13 vols, Berlin, 1838–40), vol. 4, p. 399 and vol. 7, p. 414: 'von dem was die Engländer humor nennen'.

7 The quotation derives from a fine essay by Alfred Brendel, 'Must classical music be entirely serious?', in his *Music Sounded Out: essays, lectures, interviews, afterthoughts* (London, 1990), pp. 12–53, esp. p. 14.

8 For an exploration of the subject, see A. Ziv (ed.), *National Styles of Humor* (New York, 1988).

9 A. Maurois, *Les silences du colonel Bramble* (Paris, 1918), p. 139: 'La seule cause de cette guerre, c'est que les Allemands n'ont pas le sens de l'humour'.

10 For the various titles, see the bibliography at the end of this volume.

11 G. Blaicher, 'Über das Lachen im englischen Mittelalter', *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 44 (1970), pp. 508–29; M. Douglas, *Implicit Meanings* (London, 1975), pp. 83–9.

12 For a detailed commentary on Cicero, see A. D. Leeman, H. Pinkster and E. Rabbie (eds), *M. Tullius Cicero. De oratore libri III*, vol. 3 (Heidelberg, 1989), pp. 172–333. Cicero is only marginally shorter than Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* 3.6, on which see most recently T. Viljamaa, 'Quintilian's theory of wit', in S. Jäkel and A. Timonen (eds), *Laughter down the Centuries*, vol. 1 (Turku, 1994), pp. 85–93.

13 On Castiglione's discussion of humour, see J. R. Woodhouse, *Baldesar Castiglione. A Reassessment of The Courtier* (Edinburgh, 1978), pp. 101–8.

14 Quoted in S. van Zuylen van Nyevelt, *Court Life in the Dutch Republic 1638–1689* (London and New York, n.d.), p. 67.

15 Giovanni della Casa, *Il galateo*, ed. M. Rumpf ([Florence, 1558] Heidelberg, 1988), p. 66.

16 J. du Boulay, *Portrait of a Greek Mountain Village* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 46–7.

17 See, e.g., B. Zweig, 'The mute nude female characters in Aristophanes' plays', in A. Richlin (ed.), *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome* (New York and Oxford, 1992), pp. 72–89; M. H. Caviness, 'Patron or matron? A Capetian bride and a vade mecum for her marriage bed', *Speculum*, 68 (1993), pp. 333–62, esp. 357–62.

18 R. van Stipriaan, *Leugens en vermaak. Boccaccio's novellen in de kluchtcultuur van de Nederlandse renaissance* (Amsterdam, 1996), p. 235, n. 7.

19 See, for example, N. Schindler, *Widerspenstige Leute. Studien zur Volkskultur in der frühen Neuzeit* (Frankfurt, 1992), pp. 151–74 ('Körpergroteske und Lachkultur im 16. Jahrhundert').

20 E. Moser-Rath, *Predigtmärlein der Barockzeit: Exempel, Sage, Schwank und Fabel* (Berlin, 1984).

21 Petrus Francius, *Posthuma: quibus accedunt illustrium eruditorum ad eundem epistolae* (Amsterdam, 1706), Oratio III (*De usu eloquentiae in sacris*), pp. 213–14; see also H. Roodenburg, 'Predikanten op de kansel: een verkenning van hun "eloquentia corporis" ', in *Mensen van de nieuwe tijd: een liber amicorum voor A. Th. van Deursen* (Amsterdam, 1996), pp. 324–8.

22 For the knowledge of Latin in the early modern period, see the splendid chapter in P. Burke, *The Art of Conversation* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 34–65.

23 See the excellent introduction by Brian Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric* (Oxford, 1988).

24 S. Freud, *Der Witz und seine Bedeutung zum Unbewussten* (Leipzig and Vienna, 1905), Eng. trans. J. Strachey as *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (London, 1960); A. C. Zijderveld, *Reality in a Looking-Glass: rationality through an analysis of traditional folly* (London, 1982) and 'The sociology of humour and laughter', *Current sociology – La sociologie contemporaine*, 31–3 (1983), pp. 1–103.
25 N. Elias, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* (2 vols, Basel, 1939).
26 K. Thomas, 'The place of laughter in Tudor and Stuart England', *Times Literary Supplement*, 21 January 1977, pp. 77–81.
27 It will be hardly chance that the words 'pun' and 'joke' are also attested first in 1670 (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn).